

What Students need to know about Student-Learning Assessment

Here are answers to questions students frequently ask about assessment:

1) What is student-learning assessment? I don't get it.

Basically, the Higher Learning Commission (the accrediting organization that oversees WSU and student-learning in this part of the United States) says student-learning assessment is simply a response to the following two questions:

A) What do faculty of an academic program want all students to know when they finish their program?

B) How will the faculty know that the students know it?

2) Why is student-learning assessment important?

Because through assessment, universities develop and maintain strong programs and create new ones to better meet students' needs.

3) Why is the Higher Learning Commission important?

The HLC is the organization that reviews standards at colleges and universities with membership in the North Central Association. WSU meets the standards of the HLC, is an accredited institution, and is a member of NCA.

4) Will I and other students be involved in this assessment?

Yes, very much so. Our university works toward a strong learning partnership with students. We want to know your thoughts about the value of our programs and we want to know how well students as a whole are achieving the goals of their chosen programs.

5) How will we be involved?

You may be asked to fill out questionnaires and some of your academic work may be reviewed. From time to time, a small number of students may be asked to serve as volunteers on an assessment committee; those who agree to do this will represent the other students in a program major, a college such as Liberal Arts and Sciences, or WSU as a whole. After you graduate, you may occasionally be asked to respond to an alumni survey or, if you are an employer, you may receive a work-related survey. You will also be asked to complete faculty evaluations for some of your courses.

6) What's all the fuss? Aren't course grades the definitive assessment? Student does work—student gets grade. It seems to me that grades and assessment are the same thing.

The HLC response:

- A) Many course grades are comprised of non-content related items such as attendance or participation and therefore do not solely reflect “direct” student achievement and knowledge.
- B) The course may be taught over a period of time by different faculty who use different syllabi or methods of grading and simply do not teach exactly the same way.
- C) The course grade is a composite and cannot be broken down to determine how well an individual or group of students met the stated program or individual course goals. For example in an anthropology class, a course grade would not reveal how well a student did on the theory section of the course as separate from the cultural awareness section. An exit exam for the course or a general essay at the end of the program, on the other hand, could be examined to see how students as a whole performed on different goals (e.g., theory, cultural awareness) that the faculty agreed were important for a course or for all graduates of the program to know. These data then comprise a rigorous and stable data set with results that can be compared from year to year.

7) If the course grade is not to be used, how can the outcome of students' learning be determined?

HLC requests universities to use multiple methods with at least one of the methods being a direct measure of students' -learning outcomes (achievement).

8) What do you mean by “multiple” methods?

“Multiple” usually means that the program faculty don't just base the assessment on one set of data, but “triangulate” by using three or more methods to get a full picture of how students are learning. Ablah Library has a broad collection of books on assessment that list and illustrate the different methods. A few commonly used indirect methods of student learning outcomes are:

- A) Student surveys
- B) employer/alum surveys
- C) Review of the program or certain courses within the program by an expert from outside WSU

D) employment/graduate school acceptance rates

9) If those are indirect methods, what are “direct” methods?

A wide range of direct assessment tools are available. These include essays, standardized tests, oral exams, pre- and post-tests, portfolios, research papers, and questions embedded in course exams. It’s possible that no one tool can measure all the program’s goals, but one method such as a research paper could answer more than one.

10) If we’re not using grades, then how will my work be assessed?

Your work will be assessed only as a part of the entire class. Here’s an example: The faculty of a department determine criteria they believe are important for all students to know. For a research paper, this might mean how well written the paper is, how well researched the topic is, and how well the material is analyzed. The research paper is collected when it’s due, graded, and returned to you, the student. Then all the students’ papers are reviewed again, often by more than one instructor, to learn how well the class as a whole met the important criteria. Below is a table that shows the difference between grades and assessment of learning outcomes.

12) What guarantees fair assessment?

The assessment will be fair because it comprises several measures, and these will be evaluated, often by more than one reviewer separately, and because reviewers use rubrics to make sure their judgments are uniform.

13) What is a rubric?

A rubric is a grading guide that lists the criteria for a particular outcome and what it takes for student work to reach certain levels of achievement on those criteria. In the example above, the criteria for the research paper are how well written the paper is, how well researched the topic is, and how well the material is analyzed. The level of proficiency for each criterion is spelled out by the rubric the evaluators use. This allows for assessment data to be compared from semester to semester over time. The rubric for the analysis part of the paper might be stated by the faculty as:

Exceeds Expectations: The paper theme is well defined. The paper places the topic within the appropriate historical context. The paper concludes with an evaluation of the impact of the topic.

Meets Expectations: The paper fails to meet one of the objectives listed above, while meeting the others.

Does Not Meet Expectations: The paper fails to meet two or more of the objectives. In other words, it does not provide a unified theme or place the topic in historical context or offer an evaluative conclusion.

14) Can I fail a course or an assignment because of an assessment?

Never. Student-learning assessment is about students as a group, not individual grades. However, if you are part of the teacher licensure program, you will receive information on your individual achievement in the assessment of LAS content courses that are part of your teacher education program. If you do not meet the criteria for teacher education students, you'll be given information on options that will help you reach your goal.

15) What will be done with all the assessment data that's collected?

The data will be analyzed, summarized, and reviewed by faculty. In at least one meeting per year, faculty will discuss the results of the data collected and how they will use the results to improve student learning. Some examples of action LAS faculty took in 2005 were A) changing the way some material in a course is presented by the instructor, B) adapting a course to include newly developed technologies, and C) adding a new course to the program.

15) How will I know the outcome of the assessment for my course or program, college or the university as a whole?

Yearly reports of student learning are available from your program/department chair and the dean of your college, and you may contact WSU Institutional Research for the university-wide assessment.